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ABSTRACT

Enrollment decline places new pressures on school administrators and school boards, but Ontario's Commission on Declining Enrollments found no call for a complete reorganization of either the provincial governance system or the structure of the delivery system at the administrative level. This document describes those aspects of Ontario's school system that affect its response to enrollment decline, and cites both constraints faced by school boards facing decline (demographic factors, community and school employee reactions to school closure, and financial factors) and alternative techniques for coping with decline (staff reduction, reassignment, or reorganization; school board restructuring; and allocation of surplus space). Areas listed as requiring attention at the provincial government level include support for minimal programs, long-range financial planning, appropriateness of school district boundaries, fixed costs, improvement in provincial-local relationships, and in general the assumption of a leadership role in education. Information on specific local situations was gathered in a survey of 11 of Ontario's 194 school boards. (Author/PGD)

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THE POLITICS OF EDUCATIONAL DECLINE:

ISSUES IN GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION

by

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ISSUES IN GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION[1]

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I. Introduction

In a period of declining enrolments, the most significant impact on school administrators and board members is on attitudes and behaviors toward long-standing organizational issues. Problems of financial planning, program development, personnel development and morale, relations with central authorities and the like continue to confront those charged with the governance of education. What is different in an era of decline is the intensity of certain problem areas and a change in emphasis required by administrators and school board members in dealing with organizational problems. Research undergirding this discussion suggests that educational leaders will need to reorder their own priorities and energies to utilize existing resources in coping with the organizational and political realities associated with decline. Nevertheless, the Final Report of the Ontario Commission on Declining Enrolments (Chapter 7) suggests that severe decline in student enrolments coupled with economic restraints do not call for a complete reorganization of either the governance system for education in the Province nor the structure of the delivery system at the administrative level. This conclusion was taken despite the fact that our commission

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[1]Paper prepared for presentation at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, April 1979.

sponsored research related to issues in governance and administration indicates the need for adjustments, a shifting of both attitudes and behaviors on the part of administrators and school board members in order to deal effectively with the changing conditions. Further, the research contained in Working Paper No. 9 for the Commission (Scott, et al., 1978) suggests that serious consideration should be given to possible major structural modifications in educational governance in the Province in order to make the best use of available resources for the delivery of educational services in the coming years.

In order to place these generalizations within the context of the research, it is appropriate to describe briefly the structure of education in Ontario. Although in most important senses, the educational system in Ontario is similar in structure and philosophy to other jurisdictions, there are some differences that tend to modify the generalizability of the issues under discussion in this paper. At the same time, there may be some significant clues within the structure of education in Ontario for consideration by educational leaders in other kinds of environments.

One of the most important aspects of educational governance in Ontario is the *size* of the jurisdictions. School systems for the most part are large, as a result of a massive reorganization in 1969. In 1977, there were 194 school boards in Ontario. Of these, 77 were boards of education and 48 were Roman Catholic county and district school boards. The remaining 69 systems were special in nature, for example, district and area boards in the far North with extremely small pupil populations. The number of boards contrasts sharply with the 1,490 existing in 1967, and the 4,532 boards existing in 1948. Furthermore, a majority of the pupil population is concentrated within a relatively small number of county and city boards. There are about 45 boards, for example, with pupil populations in excess of 20,000 students, and several of these have pupil populations approaching 100,000 students. Many of the county systems cover a large geographic area with attendant problems of communication and transportation. The social settings range from inner city urban to sparsely populated rural sections. Ontario itself covers a vast geographical region, extending from Cornwall in the East, to Kenora in the West, roughly equivalent to the distance between Albany, New York and Minneapolis, Minnesota.

The north-south distances are equally impressive, although most of the population is concentrated within 100 miles of the United States border.

In Ontario, each school system has a locally elected board of education. The number of elected members on a school board is relatively large, often more than 20 members in the larger systems. Roman Catholic boards are publicly supported until Grade 10, and there are Catholic representatives elected to public boards to represent those interests at the secondary level.

School systems are bureaucratic in structure, with a hierarchy of positions at the administrative level ranging from chief executive officer to school administrators at the principal, vice-principal, and possibly, department chairperson level. In addition, there are a number of quasi-administrative positions in school systems such as coordinators, consultants and ancillary personnel of various kinds. Most school systems organize for decision making and control through a series of interlocking committees or groups whose members are drawn from various levels in the hierarchy. While power tends to be unevenly distributed, with the locus toward the top of the hierarchy, the constraints brought about by government restrictions, the notion of participatory decision making, and the activity of ancillary groups such as teacher unions diffuse the ability of any one individual or group within the system to bring about change or to control.

In discussing specific issues relating to the management of decline, we rely mainly on the results of an interview survey conducted with a sample of administrators and school board members from 11 carefully selected school boards in Ontario. The full results of the study are reported in Working Paper No. 9, published by the Commission on Declining School Enrolments.

School systems were selected on the basis of size (according to student population), statute status (Board of Education, Roman Catholic Separate School Board), geographic location (embracing all regions designated by the Ministry of Education), and language of instruction (including at least two boards in which French was widely used as a language of instruction). A comprehensive Interview Guide was developed by the investigators from a review of the theoretical and research literature. The instrument was pilot tested in a system that was not part of the final sample. Revisions to the instrument and the approach were made as a result of this effort.

One or two members of the research team visited each of the 11 school systems in the sample. Interviews were conducted with the Chief Executive Officer, the chairperson of the school board (or a school board member), the senior business officials, and any other officials designated by the Chief Executive Officer. The interviews were recorded on audiotape and were subsequently converted to complete transcriptions of the exchanges. These transcriptions, along with a collection of relevant policies and administrative guidelines and/or procedures from the 11 sample school systems, formed the data base for the study.

Our study examined the kinds of changes that were being made in board policies and procedures as they adapted to decline. We found that most boards were just approaching such changes. There were many constraints that affected their abilities to cope with the impacts of declining enrolments. The next two sections discuss the major issues arising from these discussions including the relationship between government control and local control, the necessity for planning geared to decline and financial restraint, the structure of educational governance, and problems of community relations, with specific reference to school closings.

II. Constraints Faced by Boards in Coping with Decline

It is difficult for persons outside the educational system to appreciate fully the traumas of school boards in coping with the ramifications of declining enrolments. A general reaction seems to be, "If enrolment projections several years ago showed that decline was coming, why didn't they do something then?" One of the major reasons most boards didn't do something *then* was that they were still coping with expansion. As one trustee told us, "We were so choked with kids, we couldn't do anything except build, build, build." In his very large board, enrolment peaked at 106,169 pupils during the 1972-73 school year; as they decline to an expected 70,000 pupils now, they find themselves with 100 million square feet of space and some 4,900 teachers. They are the largest *business* in their community and one of the largest property owners in Canada. Trustees and administrators in this very large board, despite current difficulties,

greet decline as their ultimate salvation since it may yield a more viable and manageable system.

Small boards also have not prepared for decline, not so much because they have been building, but because they have concentrated their attention in the past on providing a quality (or even adequate) educational program, usually in areas of sparse population and a low tax base. One such board in our study sample peaked in enrolment at 4,700 pupils and has since faced a 14% decline. It cannot close any schools since many pupils already travel some 55 miles by bus to school. Decline compounds the difficulties that small rural boards have always faced. Thus, decline may mean ultimate lack of viability as a system, unless grant provisions are changed substantially.

In short, there are a variety of reasons why boards have not responded overnight to the advent of declining enrolments, and the reasons are as varied as the situations of the boards themselves. We shall discuss here a number of factors that are paramount in hindering local school boards from coping successfully with the problems associated with declining enrolments.

Some of the barriers to identifying solutions to the problems of decline arise from the demographic characteristics of the board--its geography, the mobility of the population within the jurisdictions, the ethnic mix of its people, and the socioeconomic characteristics of its people. There is nothing that a board can do to control these factors, just as the board can do nothing to change birth rates. These factors always constrain educational planning and provision; declining enrolments merely serve to magnify the constraints. The board must take such factors as *givens* and must develop plans that provide an effective educational system within the limits so imposed.

Dispersal of students over a wide geographic area, for example, necessitates small schools and makes it difficult to provide adequate staff and program. Small schools often must be sustained at the expense of larger schools in the system; the schools must have a certain number of teachers to offer a reasonable program despite the limited number of pupils. Another rural problem is the difficulty of maintaining two systems, public and separate. The result of their joint existence and competition for students is higher operating costs for both systems.

In more urban areas, school populations may be highly mobile, making it difficult to reduce costs per pupil in accord with decline. In such areas, boards typically adjust staff allocation formulae; the result is that the more stable areas subsidize the less stable areas. Where population shifts involve new housing developments, rezoning of residential to industrial districts, and the like, schools in one area may be left with much surplus space while schools in another area of the board are overcrowded or non-existent. Ratepayers look askance at school construction in one area of the board and school closures in another; yet this is the reality of decline coupled with population shifts.

The provision (or non-provision) of French-language instruction is an issue that may increase the rivalry between boards for pupils (in Canada at least) and that may result in enrolment shifts that exacerbate the effects of decline per se. As more French programs are introduced, there will also be a redistribution of teaching positions, creating further reductions in force where teachers are unable to provide instruction in French. A board's flexibility in dealing with decline will be reduced where such enrolment shifts occur within the board, resulting in sharp declines (and higher costs) in the English-language programs as well as increases (but still high costs) for the new French programs.

There are many other kinds of challenges to boards in attempting to meet the needs of the particular students in their jurisdictions. Responding to these needs is never a simple matter, but declining enrolment makes the problem even more complex. Most urban boards, for example, have areas of high ethnic group concentration. Because of the varied linguistic abilities and educational backgrounds of these pupils, the schools ideally should have smaller pupil-teacher ratios and more specialized personnel. Communication and assistance with and to immigrant parents is a related need that boards feel obligated to meet. Similarly, special and costly services need to be provided in areas of low-income, single-parent families. Such provisions become extremely difficult given the budget cuts necessitated by declining enrolments across the system.

We referred earlier to issues that must be treated as *givens* and taken into account by boards affected in their planning for coping with decline. There are many other complicating factors over which boards have no control. These events have been likened by an anthropologist to the *acts of God*

crises that agricultural society faced in the form of famines or floods. One board in our study found its actual enrolment in 1976 to be some 14,000 pupils fewer than its earlier projection. Those 14,000 pupils were present in the borough, but as one trustee explained, "They're sitting in Catholic schools, Jewish schools, and private schools." In short, some *act of God* had affected public attitudes so that one could not predict where pupils were going to be, even though one might predict how many pupils there would be somewhere in schools. The predicted shortage in gasoline could be another *act of God* crisis that could radically affect the location of students.

Probably no *man-made* constraint will create as much difficulty for local boards, at a personal level at least, as will that of community pressures arising from attempts to close and consolidate schools. The process of decision making regarding school closures was called by a trustee "the politics of declining enrolment at the local level." A director of education listed "intestinal fortitude" of trustees as one of three major problems in dealing with decline. He recalled a visit to another system in which the officials were celebrating the board's new policy regarding school closures. The visitor reacted, "Just wait until the first crunch and they'll chicken out, policy or no policy."

Trustees, in many cases, are unwilling to make politically volatile decisions unless financial gains are really substantial. They consider it not worth the hassles otherwise. The *hassles* arise from community residents, often reacting on the basis of protecting the neighborhood school. A typically urban situation is that in which some of the schools are bulging at the seams, while other schools are experiencing very sharp decline. Yet, if the crowded schools happen to be in low-income areas with one-parent families, newly-immigrated ethnic groups, etc., it is extremely difficult for a board to decide to bus some of the students to schools with surplus space.

As one chief executive officer lamented, "The consequences are just too painful, more than you can imagine. We run into all kinds of snobbery." While this particular borough has some 20 elementary schools below an enrolment of 100, these are located in upper middle class areas. At the same time, there is an elementary school in another part of the borough that has some 1,700 pupils jammed into a 500-pupil school plus portables.

This area has the highest percent of child abuse in the city; its students represent 36 nationalities; 75% live in subsidized housing, etc. Do you wonder why the board cannot make a rational decision about redistributing these pupils, or even closing some of the WASP schools to provide resources for its poorer schools? That is the reality of local politics in an era of decline.

The separate school boards have a different kind of political issue to consider in anticipating school closures or busing. Their ratepayers have the option of switching their taxes and sending their children to the public schools, an option they might exercise if the neighborhood separate school closes. From our interviews, we concluded that it also will be extremely difficult for boards to obtain community support for the sharing of facilities between the public and separate systems, despite government pressure to do so.

Staff and community place other pressures on boards that reduce their flexibility to consider alternative means of reducing costs. One of the pressures is to reduce central administration, often to a level seen as highly undesirable by the board. The average parents and teachers get very aroused if the board adds senior staff, even if the position is established to implement something that they wanted. And even trustees lack a full understanding of the roles of consultants, coordinators, media personnel, A-V technicians, and even high school department heads. While school-level positions are often protected by staffing formulae agreed to in collective bargaining, and while central administrators are more vulnerable, it is these latter positions that trustees can defend from first-hand knowledge of the roles.

Community pressures are also generated from the failure to understand tax rates in a period of decline. As one trustee remarked, "They think nothing of getting another thousand or two in salary per year, or paying more for groceries, rent, etc., but if we're talking about another $15 in local property taxes, they think it's terrible." It is very difficult for ratepayers, more and more of whom are non-parents, to accept that educational taxes continue to rise while school population is declining and when services seem to be cut back. The public also think that teachers' salaries are too high. Given that per-pupil costs rise (Rideout, 1978) in a period of declining

enrolment, this problem of communication with the public is a serious one indeed.

In all our interviews with trustees and officials, the identification of constraints imposed by the government and its Ministry of Education generated the strongest feelings of frustration. Three major themes emerged from the interviews with regard to external constraints: financial restraints, programmatic expectations, and teacher legislation and regulations. The first of these, financial restraints, included a host of concerns, including the Provincial share of educational costs, the timing of grant announcements, the absence of long-range planning in grant allocations, inadequacies in grants, the near-freeze on capital expenditures, and red tape and delays. Both the other two themes--programmatic expectations and teacher legislation--are related to financial concerns. The overarching message from the discussions is that the government has proceeded directly to reduce revenues in accord with declining enrolments without being sensitive to the fact that local boards are not able to reduce expenditures in the same proportions immediately and, in some instances, even over a longer term.

Time will not permit a full discussion of the various issues which are covered in Working Paper No. 9. We will briefly highlight some of the major points. Among the financial restraints, trustees were alarmed by what they see as a reduction in the proportion of educational costs paid by the Provincial government. The reduced funds must be recovered by increases in local property taxes, so that only one segment of society is making up the difference. Alternatively, services must be cut, especially for boards with a low tax base.

Over and over, we heard complaints about the timing of decisions regarding Provincial grants to schools. Because of the difference in the fiscal year and the school year, boards have already committed 60% of the anticipated revenues for the fiscal year by the time the fiscal year actually begins. So the only portion of the board's budget that can be drastically altered after grants announcements are made is that covering four months of the next school year. Thus, local boards and administrators are caught in an embarrassing position. It appears to local ratepayers that they are guilty of lack of planning, but they believe the blame should shift to the

government. Trustees and officials bemoan the lack of long-range planning and fiscal commitment from the government. As one said, "In a large business, it just wouldn't be tolerated, and yet we have to put up with it."

With regard to grant inadequacies, the government has removed the off-setting grants that it instituted earlier to help boards ease the advent of decline. Yet boards have not been able to reduce fixed costs and to gear down rapidly. The present grants seem especially inadequate for small boards and for separate school boards. There were also complaints from trustees that local boards are unable to finance modifications to school accommodations in order to facilitate school consolidation. Other concerns were noted as well with regard to the government's capital expenditures policy and procedures.

Turning to constraints that stem from programmatic expectations, we were told often that Provincial statements and policies have helped to bring the level of expectations *out of sight* in a period of decline. Indeed, it seems to many that the government continues to provide short-term incentives (*come-on's*) to boards to introduce new and costly programs, to encourage the public to expect boards to expand French language and special education programs, and the like. At the same time, the Provincial share of educational costs has been reduced.

Finally, most of the trustees whom we interviewed saw themselves as having been "thrown to the wolves" in terms of teacher negotiations because of Provincial teacher legislation and regulations. The government's Bill 100, they argue, not only lacks management rights but also opens up the negotiations process to all kinds of teacher demands, such as negotiated pupil-teacher ratios or class sizes.

A few boards feel that they have already backed themselves into a corner with collective agreements that will make it extremely difficult to deal with declining enrolments by reducing staff. One trustee commented, "The way some of our contracts read now, our secondary teachers are literally on staff until the day they die; we may have to keep them at least on permanent supply." Further, decisions (such as government regulations concerning certification) taken during a period of expansion restrain the ability of local boards to reduce costs. Teacher costs continue to rise despite decline, and it is difficult to release the marginally competent teachers or to rely upon attrition to reduce the tenured teachers

on a board's payroll. Existing teacher regulations make it very difficult for local boards to employ or to retain young teachers. In short, there is little flexibility in the regulations, which seem to have been designed for growing systems. Flexibility with regard to staffing decisions is essential in a period of declining enrolments.

III. Alternative Policies and Strategies for Coping with Decline

Declining enrolments have spawned a myriad of problems at the governance administrative level, but these are not discrete in their relationship to decline. The general economic problems in the Province and in the country are also factors. Questions about the appropriate administrative structure of school boards in a period of decline do not differ too much from questions asked during a period of expansion. What has happened is a quickening of concern about educational reform and about organizational renewal within the social context.

One of the perennial questions facing school boards is the matter of the central office component. How many supervisory officers should there be? How many consultants? How large should the business office component be? Since the advent of serious decline, many school boards have reduced their administrative components at the executive level, and, as far as we can tell, at the coordinative and consultative level. In fact, in the boards in the sample, the reduction was proportionate to the decline in pupil population. There is a point, however, below which central offices cannot be reduced, or at least cannot be reduced in direct proportion to decline in population. Reduction of central office staff must be considered by a school board in terms of functions to be carried out, and a position should be eliminated only if the board has developed a plan for the duties of an individual to be carried out by others in the system.

There are several strategies for increasing the efficiency of central office staffs in large jurisdictions without impairing the quality of coordinating and delivery services. Large jurisdictions in Ontario have tended to organize into units called "families of schools." Each "family" has one or more secondary schools with accompanying feeder schools under the

administrative responsibility of an area superintendent and his staff. Declining enrolments coupled with fiscal restraint have impelled some systems to move away from this rather tall structure, perhaps dividing the system into two or three sections, with clusterings of schools within the section on a more informal basis. In such a move, the role of school principal takes on a more managerial tone, with the implication that some in-school administrative functions would filter to assistant principals, heads, and teachers. In addition, functions now assumed by coordinators and consultants can be shifted to the school level in many instances, assuming that an experienced and professional teaching staff can become more self sufficient in program matters.

Most school systems in Ontario have operated with an administrative council, a group of senior officials who meet weekly for several hours with the Chief Executive Officer. One board in the sample had eliminated the administrative council on the rationale that it is not a good use of time to involve a large group in every issue coming before the board, regardless of whether the individuals in the group have the expertise to exercise judgment. Rather, this board has adopted a plan whereby specific problems or issues are referred to one senior official who then forms an ad hoc committee of short duration to arrive at a recommendation. On occasion, the total supervisory officers' group is called together, but only to deal with a specific system-wide problem. It is interesting to note that this board has reduced its supervisory officer complement by four positions in the past few years, although we cannot claim it is totally the result of this shift in administrative functioning.

Consideration of these kinds of strategies for responding to pressures to reduce the central office component can lead to greater efficiency without necessarily reducing the coordinative and control functions of the central office. The strongest assertion from the respondents to the study, however, was that actual reduction of central office staff should be the result of serious study of the consequences of the action rather than reducing on the basis of some formula and then planning afterwards.

One of the popular notions for confronting decline at the administrative level is the creation of short-term administrative appointments at the central office. An individual might be brought in for a year or two years.

The effects of lack of mobility and lack of opportunity for advancement could minimized. Such plans were in operation in several of the systems in the sample. The difficulty with them, in large systems at least, is that the plan generally does little for the problem of decline, although it is a good experience for the individual. In one system in the study, for example, there were several hundred individuals in the system certified for administration. One was chosen each year to work in the central office on a short-term appointment.

The issue of local control of education in Ontario is one of the central themes of educational history in the Province. To the extent that there is local control at the community level, the local school board is the mechanism whereby such control is exercised and articulated. School board members are elected for two years. In the past, it was not uncommon for members to be re-relected for several terms. Today, this is changing; there have been increases in the number of young adults (under 25 years of age) and in the number of women who choose to run, often on the basis of some reform platform. As indicated previously, school boards are relatively large in terms of number, with 20 or more members on the larger boards. School trustees are also paid several thousand dollars a year for their service.

Questions about the role of trustee in educational governance--the size of boards, and whether trustees should be full time--are long standing ones. The issue of whether to have school boards at all is seldom raised, at least seriously, although in some countries (Australia and England, for example) there are different patterns of governance.

One of the problems related to school boards raised in our interviews concerned the rather forbidding complexity of school operation from the trustee point of view. The sorts of background and knowledge required to deal with multi-million dollar budgets, negotiated contracts from employees, school closings, program development, staff development and a myriad of other elements of the school situation take time to develop. As one board chairperson stated:

> ...the fact that school boards are elected for two years, and you just get people to have some kind of awareness and understanding of the whole operation,

> and then they quit or they're not re-elected... some kind of consistent approach is needed--new trustees come in like lambs to slaughter.

Among the alternatives available to meet this problem is the notion of an extension of the term of trustee, perhaps four- or six-year terms. An additional possibility is to establish an apprenticeship aspect to school board membership. Individuals planning to run for office could be required to indicate their interest a year in advance, and during that year the board could run a kind of in-service training program, exposing potential trustees to the intricacies of the operation. Another possibility, and this is certainly more appropriate to Ontario than to other jurisdictions, is to decrease the numbers of members on boards. In terms of decision making, there is no evidence to suggest that a twenty-person board does better than a ten-person board. The smaller units, however, would lead to greater efficiency, less demand on the decreasing numbers of administrators and a number of other advantages.

A more radical proposal for the restructuring of the school board surfaced in several of the interviews. The suggestion was to consider the formation of a broad-based board in the community, responsible for all education-related services. In addition to the responsibility for elementary and secondary education, such a board would be accountable for libraries, parks and recreation, adult education services, and other education-related activities. The school board in its present form would disappear. The notion is one of a "family of services." One of the attractive aspects of such an idea is that potential disruptive infighting among agencies seeking to ensure their own survival by "grabbing" greater and greater slices of the resource pie in the community would be lessened. Allocation of employees across agencies could be greatly facilitated by amalgamating the responsibility for education-related activities in one board.

There are a number of problems. The long tradition of the separation of public education from other municipal activities is firmly entrenched. While it is a dying myth, there is a sense among educators and among laymen that education should not be tainted with any sense of "politics" in the narrow sense of the word. Further, the institution of such a system would

require a period of study relating to such questions as the appropriate administrative structure, implications for tax collections and allocations, relations to the central government, new methods of setting priorities, the size of jurisdictions and the like. It would require, in short, a major reorganization of the governing structure.

One of the major problems in a declining enrolment situation facing trustees and administrators is the question of appropriate use of excess space. Related to this are strategies appropriate for closing schools. At first glance, it might appear that this problem is amenable to some sort of formula or set of formulae. When a school reaches a certain size, for example, the policy could mandate that it be closed. The results of our interviews, however, indicate that there are a number of factors involved in the accommodation question. The issue becomes so complex that it is difficult to generalize across the Province, and sometimes variations within a single system are such that each accommodation situation needs to be considered as a discrete problem. Factors already discussed such as the ethnic composition of the district, the unevenness of decline across the district, geography and sparse population, school accommodation and closure and closure policies should be flexible as opposed to a single formula for either individual districts or regions or the entire Province.

Although most of our respondents favored leasing rather than selling excess property, our view is a cautious one. We favor the recommendation of the Illinois State Commission on Declining Enrolments to the effect that leasing should be the choice if there is reason to believe that the facility might be needed in five or ten years for public educational purposes. If a decision is made to lease, there is the question of the kinds of tenants appropriate for the facilities and whether the board should engage in profit-making activities with its properties. There are some legal problems in this area, and if boards are to engage in profit-making activities, then the regulations will have to be modified. In general, it seems to us that boards, in cooperation with government authorities, ought to examine seriously the possibility of moving toward profit-making uses of surplus property.

There has been considerable discussion of administrative arrangements within systems when excess space is available. "Twinning" is one such

concept in which two small buildings would remain open but, instead of two principals, there would be one in charge of both buildings. There are many variations. There could be a new name given to the new entity. Former names could be retained, and there would still be separate schools, but with one administration.

Other kinds of strategies involve either closing off parts of certain buildings to save costs, or leasing parts of buildings to other organizations. Most of these ideas are worthy of consideration, but we have a strong recommendation in this regard. Before twinning or any other organizational arrangement is adopted, there should be research and evaluation carried out by qualified agencies, probably external to the system. In one board in our study, for example, it was pointed out that combining the two high schools in the district into one would have a profound effect on inter-school activities. The district is in an isolated area, and the potential for contact with other high schools for sports events and other kinds of interaction is limited.

The decision to close a school usually involves a number of relevant groups, including school board members, school personnel, citizens' committees, and outside consultants. The difficulty with the participatory model, thus far, is that the issues are generally emotionally charged. Groups tend to take firm stands either for or against board proposals so that good decisions are practically impossible to achieve quickly and without disruption. The point is that the responsibility for school closures rests with the board. Boards should gather all relevant information and solicit opinions, but then should proceed to act with as little fanfare as possible. If public hearings are held, they should be few in number, and the decision by the board should follow close on the hearings, possibly on the same night as the final hearing.

Most educators seem interested in the possibilities of retraining and of moving teachers from one area to another where possible, without undue restraints imposed by regulations. At the Provincial level, therefore, there is a need to reconsider many of the certification practices with a view to increasing the possibility of movement from one area of certification

to another, so long as the quality of the teaching can be maintained. As one respondent said:

> We'd like to be in a position where you have say half a dozen or a dozen or maybe even 30 teachers who could teach any number of subjects so that even though there are fewer teachers we have the option to keep up the number of courses that we're going to offer.

There is some limit to this, of course. We are familiar with the problem in districts with a large French-language program. Teachers with English-speaking backgrounds cannot easily retrain or equip themselves to move into bilingual situations, even though there is probably more potential for teacher employment in bilingual situations. There are other similar examples, especially at the secondary-school level. On the other hand, one could imagine providing easier mobility between elementary and secondary schools with a minimum of retraining. And there are many subject areas where mobility could be encouraged if the regulations permitted it.

IV. The Provincial Government and the Ministry

The tradition of government influence in education is strong in Ontario and in the other provinces of Canada, stronger than it is in the United States, for example. As a result, the statutes, regulations, and financial supports from the government are extremely important to local school districts, and there is a special responsibility for the government and its bureaucracies to examine statutes and regulations in the light of declining enrolments. Following are some areas identified in our study that need attention from the government.

Support for Minimal Programs

With declining enrolments and the resulting squeeze on comprehensive educational programs, there is a need for the government to provide

support so that every jurisdiction in the Province can maintain a minimal educational program. The whole concept of equality of educational opportunity is called into question in a period of severe retrenchment, especially in small districts.

Long-range Financial Planning

The government and the Ministry need to engage in long-range financial planning so that local boards can have a sense of continuity. Further, there should be developed common forms and procedures for financial planning at the local level so that comparisons can be made and local policies can be developed in line with Provincial projections for support. It has sometimes been the case that government incentives have been provided over the short term for new programs, but then this support has been withdrawn, leaving local jurisdictions in an untenable position financially. Long-range planning would alleviate this problem.

Many of our respondents were of the opinion that the use of per-pupil costs as a basis for support, no matter how it is tinkered with to reflect current conditions, has outlived its utility. We ought to look seriously at some alternatives in this regard. One such alternative is for programmatic grants.

School District Boundaries

The current boundaries for school districts have been in place since 1969. These boundaries, essentially along county lines, are not sacred. Consideration should be given to combining some jurisdictions into larger units, especially where decline is making some systems less than viable as separate units. We suggest that there should be a study at the Provincial level of appropriate school district boundaries with suggestions for change where shifting populations are causing major problems. In relation to this, consideration should also be given to extensive sharing of facilities. Encouragement should be given to having pupils with special needs and interests attend schools in other jurisdictions that might have strong programs in particular areas. In this way, variety in program offerings could be maintained.

Fixed Costs

The most dramatic and widespread negative effect of current government policies on support is related to fixed costs. Since the basic policy is to provide supports according to the number of pupils, the effect of a dramatic decline in students in any one year is severe, especially since some costs do not decline according to the number of students. The loss of 100 students from a secondary school results in a reduced grant, but it probably does not decrease the heating bill, and probably has no effect on the teaching staff if, as is likely, the decline is random across the school. The loss of one student out of each of 100 classes does not permit a reduction in the teaching force. There needs to be some leeway permitted, perhaps some other basis for funding so that there is a period of adjustment.

Provincial-Local Relationships

There is also a need for an improvement of relationships between the Ministry of Education and central office administrators and trustees. One official comments: "There has been a void in this Province in recent years in communication. I need information. I need cooperation. We need support." There was a sense among the respondents that administrators are bearing the brunt of the impact of declining enrolments in terms of reaction from the public and from professional staff. However, they are not receiving support from the Ministry in the form of frequent consultation or an understanding of the need to revise certain regulations in the light of decline. There needs to be direct and frequent communication between the Ministry and directors of education, and local districts need to feel that Ministry initiatives are in response to the needs expressed by those in the local districts responsible for carrying out the programs.

Our analysis of the rather frequent and strong critical comments toward the Ministry and toward the government from our respondents is that the response is more than just the normal seeking for a visible and vulnerable scapegoat. Genuine and serious concerns were voiced. There is a sense that the Ministry of Education needs to assume greater public

relations responsibility for the criticisms currently levelled at local jurisdictions, especially on issues related to decline. There is a perception, strongly held by most respondents, that government policies are handed down, but the accountability for them is focused on local trustees and administrators who are powerless to all intents and purposes to do anything.

In essence, we sensed a need among educators at the local level for the Ministry and for the government to assume leadership in education. There is a new image needed for education, an image that goes beyond responding to problems of declining enrolments, an image that speaks to the social realities of Ontario and to the needs of its citizens and its young people.

Several major themes have emerged from our study. One such theme is the vulnerability of central office administrators and trustees to the fact of declining enrolments. Articulate voices from the community demand to know why their schools must be closed, why the teaching force is to be reduced, why the educational program may have to be curtailed. Teachers, more professionalized and independent than ever, voice their fears and frustrations at the prospects of layoffs, larger classes, and reduced resources. The general economic turndown creates pressures on the government to reduce support. All of these factors impinge directly upon the governing structure of school districts, creating serious concerns about how to deal with educational problems on the part of administrators and trustees who have been conditioned to a long period of expansion in education in Ontario.

A second theme emerging from our discussions with trustees and administrators across the Province is that, while we are in a situation of declining enrolments with all of its attendant problems, the basic educational issues remain; the fundamental educational responsibility is to ensure that the delivery of quality educational services to the children and youth of the Province is maintained and improved. Many of the issues identified in the context of declining enrolments are concerns that existed during the period of expansion. While it is true that the approaches to these problems may vary in a period of decline, the essential fact is that the commitment and concerns are the same. Thus the intent

of this paper is not to identify new educational issues, but to discuss alternative approaches to policy and practice from the point of view of trustees and senior officials responsible for managing school systems whose student populations are shrinking.

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